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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRATISLAVA 000466

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SUBJECT: THE 1989 DIVIDE IS GROWING

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BRATISLAVA 00000466 001.2 OF 003

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary. Divisions between the Slovak protagonists of the Velvet Revolution and the current leadership are growing sharper as 20th anniversary commemorations approach. A flood of retrospectives are giving rise to reflections about the past, but also on the extent to which the aspirations of 1989 have -- or have not -- been fulfilled. Disappointed critics accuse the government of undermining democracy and draw sharp and unflattering contrasts between the heroes of the fight, e.g., Vaclav Havel, Fedor Gal and Jan Langos, and today's political elite -- many of whom are former communists.

12. (C) For its part, the government is blithely ignoring the criticism. After months of anticipation as to how or even if the government would mark the day, we recently learned that Parliament Speaker Paska will co-host a November 17 gala event with his Czech counterpart at the same time the leading opposition parties stage their own commemoration. Remarkably, Prime Minister Fico will spend the eve of the anniversary in Moscow with Vladimir Putin, but after a stop in London to give a speech addressing the events of 1989 will return for Paska's celebration. The planned events will not unify Slovaks around a shared achievement, but will likely deepen the divide between those, such as PM Fico, who famously claimed not to have noticed the events of November 1989, and those who took part in, or were inspired by them. The divisions also reflect the ambivalence of the Slovak public: a recent Pew survey shows that while 80 percent of Slovaks favor democratic government, only 29 percent say they are more content today than under socialism. End Summary.

The Langos Awards and a Tale of Two Visits

13. (U) The recent Jan Langos awards, honoring the Dalai Lama and Slovak dissident and Velvet Revolution protagonist Fedor Gal, gave the opposition a high-profile platform from which to reflect on Slovakia's path since 1989. (Note: Langos, who died in 2006, was a leading Slovak anti-communist figure who, as the first Interior Minister of the newly-democratic Czechoslovak Republic, purged the StB. He later founded the Nation's Memory Institute, which houses the records of the communist and

fascist-era secret services.) In addition to the awards ceremony, the Dalai Lama participated in a series of events during his two-day visit to Bratislava. Although the trip had been long planned, he was not received by any member of the government. In an unprecedented step, parliament's protocol chief sent a letter to MPs requesting that they not meet with the Dalai Lama, in light of Slovakia's ties with China. Despite (or perhaps because of) the injunction, opposition figures clamored for an audience with the Dalai Lama and 5,000 Slovaks turned out to hear him speak.

¶4. (C) The presence of the Dalai Lama in Bratislava was widely covered by the media, and commentators could not resist contrasting his welcome to that of Chinese Defense Minister/Deputy PM Liang, who arrived in Bratislava a few days earlier. The reactions of the Slovak political class to the two high-profile guests were like a rorschach test. Liang's visit was shrouded in secrecy until after the fact. The spokesman for the Defense Ministry explained that this unorthodox step had been taken to ensure that the visit was 'not politicized' by rabble-rousers, as had been the case with the June visit of President Hu (reftel). Despite the sotto voce profile of the visit, the GOS rolled out the red carpet for Liang, who met with a number of senior GOS officials.

Disappointment and Growing Concern

¶5. (U) Like his co-awardee, Fedor Gal's life was also shaped by the greatest tragedies of the 20th century. He was born in the Terezin concentration camp. He became a leading dissident

BRATISLAVA 00000466 002.2 OF 003

and one of the few Slovaks who played a meaningful role in the Velvet Revolution. Gal was persecuted during the Meciar era for having opposed the break-up of Czechoslovakia and is a fierce critic of the current Slovak Administration. In his brief acceptance remarks, Gal asked if, twenty years after the Velvet Revolution, all citizens feel at home in Slovakia. 'Do Roma and Hungarians feel at home, too? Can we be proud of our politicians today? Don't the hearts of these people hide a revived sentiment for two terrible totalitarian regimes - fascism and communism?' Gal urged the audience -- as had Langos during his lifetime -- not to forget the past, particularly now that the country is led by 'recent communists and extreme nationalists.'

¶6. (U) Remarks by others who played crucial roles in 1989 and again in the 1998 campaign against the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Meciar, e.g., former Ambassador to the U.S. Martin Butora -- although not as sharp as Gal's -- also conveyed concern about the current political culture. Butora spoke movingly about the courage of Langos and others two decades ago, but described the present as 'a time when feelings of helplessness and skepticism are spreading dangerously, in a situation where the norms of basic decency decline and primitivism are on the rise--when skeptics whisper ominously about the irrelevance of the small ones and the need to conform to the stronger ones.'

'An Island of Positive Deviation'

¶7. (C) After Gal and Butora's somber interventions, the Dalai Lama's speech visibly lifted the crowd. When the ceremony ended, a tumble of people poured onto the street. It seemed as if all of Slovakia's intellectual elite were gathered in front of the theater, and were in no hurry to disperse. As acquaintances greeted one another, we heard one woman comment that it was unfortunate that those (referring to members of the government) who should have heard the Dalai Lama's message of tolerance hadn't been in attendance. In fact, we saw only one representative of the government at the event, a mid-level official from the cabinet office's human rights department. Another attendee said the gathering reminded him of the so-called 'islands of positive deviation,' a term coined by Martin Butora to describe the diverse groups of civic activists that united against Meciar in the late 1990's.

Planned Commemorations

¶8. (U) The official gala event co-hosted by Parliament Speaker Paska and his Czech counterpart will be held at the new Slovak National Theater on November 17. At the old National Theater, the leading opposition parties, SDKU, SMK and KDH will host a separate celebration on the same evening. Although the opposition, unlike the government, can claim some genuine dissidents in its ranks, many of the leading protagonists in the 1989 events have told us that they prefer to avoid these 'partisan' activities, and commemorate the anniversary more informally -- or in Prague. The Embassy is supporting several November 17-related activities and will participate in conferences and roundtables marking the anniversary.

Comment and Conclusion

¶9. (C) If the speeches at the Langos event marked the opening round in what will be an ever sharper debate for the hearts and minds of the Slovak electorate, PM Fico's speech on the Velvet Revolution, to be delivered in London in November 17, will represent the government's first salvo. We imagine it will extol the virtues of European-style 'social democracy,' note the strides Slovakia has made in past the 20 years (particularly

BRATISLAVA 00000466 003.2 OF 003

during his government), and argue that that recent events, including the economic crisis, prove that there were elements of socialism worth retrieving. Fico knows his voters: while a new Pew poll shows that 81 percent of Slovaks favor a democratic government, it also shows that only 29 percent feel they are better off today.

¶10. (C) Fico's political opponents are flummoxed by his steadfast popularity and the public's tolerance for rampant government corruption and the return of communist officials, StB collaborators and Meciar-era thugs to key positions of influence. The reflexive ease with which Fico criticizes the U.S. and his clear affinity for Moscow unnerves many, in particular Gal and his Velvet Revolution compatriots. For this cohort, most of whom are no longer politically active, the

concern is not so much Fico's electoral success, but rather the potential negative effects of another four years of a Fico-led government on both the country's internal direction and outward orientation. The dueling events of November 17 should be interesting, indeed.

EDDINS